

## WHAT IS AN EPIC?

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An epic in its most specific sense is a *genre* of classical poetry originating in Greece. The conventions of this *genre* are several:

- (a) It is a long narrative about a serious or worthy traditional subject.
- (b) Its diction is **elevated in style**. It employs a formal, dignified, objective tone and many figures of speech.
- (c) The narrative focused on the exploits of an **epic hero** or demigod who represents the cultural values of a race, nation, or religious group.
- (d) The hero's success or failure determines the **fate of an entire people** or nation.
- (e) The action takes place in a **vast setting**; it covers a wide geographic area. The setting is frequently set some time in the remote past.
- (f) The action contains superhuman feats of strength or military prowess.
- (g) Gods or supernatural beings frequently take part in the action to affect the outcome. This **supernatural intervention** often implies two simultaneous plots.
- (h) The poem begins with the **invocation of a muse** to inspire the poet--i.e., a prayer to an appropriate supernatural being. The speaker asks that this being provide him the suitable emotion, creativity, or diction to finish the poem. Often the poet states a theme or argument for the entire work--such as "arms and the man."
- (i) The narrative starts ***in medias res***, in the middle of the action. Subsequently, the earlier events leading up to the start of the poem will be recounted in the characters' narratives or in flashbacks.
- (j) The epic contains long **catalogs** of heroes or important characters, focusing on highborn kings and great warriors rather than peasants and commoners.
- (k) The epic employs extended similes (called **epic similes**) at appropriate spots of the story, and a traditional scene of extended description in which the hero arms himself.
- (l) Often, the main protagonist undergoes a terrifying journey--sometimes a **descent into the underworld**--i.e., into hell or the realm of the dead.

The term applies most directly to classical Greek texts like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* but it is clear that Roman authors like Virgil intentionally imitate the *genre* in works like the *Aeneid*. However, some critics have applied the term more loosely. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* has also been called an epic of Anglo-Saxon culture, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is called an epic of Christian culture, *El Cid* is an epic of Spanish culture, *Gilgamesh* is an epic of Babylonian culture, Longfellow's *Hiawatha* is an epic of American culture, and Shakespeare's various history plays have been collectively called an epic of Renaissance Britain. Contrast with the **mock epics** of Alexander Pope and later Enlightenment writers to see its influence in humorous form.